



Chico State staff, students and conservationists look on as patches of deer grass burn on Monday, Dec. 11, 2023 in Chico, California. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

## **Mechoopda Tribe brings ‘cultural burn’ to Chico State**

**CHICO** — For He-Lo Ramirez, burning patches of deer grass along Big Chico Creek was more than just maintaining a healthy environment.

Ramirez, a member of the Mechoopda Tribe and the environmental director for the tribe, explained that his ancestors once lived in and around the areas surrounding Big Chico Creek, Little Chico Creek and the Sacramento River.

“This general area is our traditional territory,” Ramirez said. “And we’ve been using cultural fire just as essentially every other California Native group since time immemorial. Specifically, we’re returning good fire onto the land on Chico State’s campus.”

The area selected for the cultural burn is roughly that of where Bahapki Village once stood, a village inhabited by the Mechoopda Tribe near the Bidwell Mansion. The goal of these burns has historically been to keep healthy ecosystems for flora and fauna.

“Today specifically, we’re burning deer grass,” Ramirez said. “So deer grass is a culturally important plant, traditionally used for basket weaving. And essentially, for every other plant species we have here that’s native, they’ve all adapted to these fire-prone ecosystems and since we have been stewarding the lands as California Natives for over 10,000 years, it’s part of keeping the individual plants healthy but also the ecosystem.”



A crew with the Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve stood by as support on Monday, Dec. 11, 2023 for a control burn at the Chico State campus in Chico, California. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

Ramirez went on to say the plants, when left alone for too long, can cause complications on the local environment.

“There is a feedback loop where if you don’t return fire to these plants, they’ll accumulate pathogens or accumulate plant architectures that are very gnarly and accumulate dead wood and eventually, they’ll get to a point where they either die or become incredibly weak. And they won’t have good plant architecture that is beneficial for wildlife and also human use.”

### **Beyond burning**

Before introducing the fire back to the patches of deer grass, Chico State Professor affiliated with the Miwok Tribe Don Hankins invited the large group of students, faculty and conservation workers to pick from the patches and take handfuls of the material typically used for basket weaving.

A professor of geography and planning as well as a weaver, Hankins had considerable experience in this field and was even asked in his job interview if he would help conduct burns within the city of Chico. Before the project began, Hankins showed the beginnings of a basket he had started using materials found locally.

“This has been a long time in the making,” Hankins said of the burn. “He-Lo, myself and other tribal members from Mechoopda have been talking about where we could bring fire back to the campus for a very long time and we’re finally at the point of being able to do it. So today’s burn is more of a demonstration of what that opportunity is and what cultural stewardship looks like.”



He-Lo Ramirez sets light to a patch of deer grass along Big Chico Creek on Monday, Dec. 11, 2023 in Chico, California. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)



Rhianna Dutra observes a control burn at Chico State on Monday, Dec. 11, 2023 in Chico, California. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

Deserea Langley, with help from her daughter Rose Ward, collects deer grass which is commonly used for basket weaving in Chico, California on Monday, Dec. 11, 2023. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)



A patch of deer grass burns in an effort to safely return fire to the land at Chico State in Chico, California on Monday, Dec. 11, 2023. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)



Kristen Kaczynski sets fire to a patch of deer grass with help from Chico State Professor Don Hankins during a tribal control burn on Monday, Dec. 11, 2023 in Chico, California. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

Students and other attendees quickly jumped at the chance to collect some of the grass before it burned including Deserea Langley who brought her daughter, Rose Ward, along to share the tradition. Langley is affiliated with both the Paiute and Ashoe tribes located in and around the Susanville Indian Rancheria.

“I just thought it was an important moment to be part of and to bring my daughter to so that she could witness bringing back good fire on campus and hopefully she will see pictures of this moment and remember it so she can talk about it and hopefully help bring good fire back to her people,” Langley said.

### **Good fire**

Both Hankins and Ramirez began the burn process with two patches of deer grass located just behind Chico State’s tribal office. What began as a small flame would quickly overtake a patch and the fountainlike green and yellow blades collapsed to the ground, blackened and ashen.

Butte County is no stranger to fire, typically on a much larger and more destructive scale. Hankins noted that a large part of this project was figuring out how to show the community that fire can be used for good.

“(We wanted) the general public to be aware of the fire effects,” Hankins said. “And when I say fire effects, I mean we’re looking at how these plants respond, the regeneration of these plants and their utility for weaving and the qualities of those plants and how they can be improved by fire. So this is day one of beginning that process.”

The group eventually made its way upstream with eyes on much larger patches of deer grass. This time, students were offered a chance to set light to them. As more patches were set aflame, pillars of smoke rose creating a grey wall along Big Chico Creek.

Workers with the Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve stood by with their equipment to ensure safety and ideally put concerns from onlookers at ease by being present. The crew donned bright yellow fire-resistant uniforms.

“We’re here just as support for the tribe,” said Rhianna Dutra with the ecological reserve. “We’re here to be present for the community. Our community has had a lot of trauma around wildfire and so having the presence of a bunch of wildland firefighters here, I think will help calm our community.”

While the crew was on-site, Dutra noted that the tribe members were taking the helm on the cultural burn.

“We plan to just kind of take a backseat and let the tribe do what they do,” Dutra said.

Earlier this year, the state legislature passed Senate Bill 310 which essentially shifted definitions to allow for additional cultural burns, streamlining the process for tribes to conduct their burn projects. This opened the door for more similar projects in the future to help maintain ecosystems and provide additional shielding against large-scale wildfires.

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